Probe Reasserts That Ray Was King's Assassin

New Conspiracy Claims Baseless, Officials Say

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Tennessee law enforcement officials have closed an investigation into new conspiracy claims surrounding the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., saying yesterday that they remain "absolutely convinced" of the guilt of James Earl Ray, who admitted to the crime nearly three decades ago.

The new investigation was launched in 1993 after the former owner of a Memphis cafe came forward to say he had received $100,000 to arrange King's murder—a story the report rejects. The report also dismisses claims by Ray and his latest attorney, William F. Pepper, that a mysterious gun runner known as "Raoul" set up Ray to be a patsy in the King assassination.

"Our aim was to try to prove conclusively, once and for all, that Ray, who acted alone, is responsible for the unconscionable killing of one of the most important figures in world history," said Lee Coffee, a Tennessee prosecutor who is handling the Ray case. "We are and have been convinced that Mr. Ray is the actual gunman. Now, we have tried to lay to rest some of the conspiracy theories."

But rather than subside, the shifting conspiracy theories about King's death have received renewed attention as the 30th anniversary of the famed civil rights leader's assassination approaches.

For years, many people, including intimates of King, have believed that Ray did not act alone. Some, noting then-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's hatred and harassment of King, have long suspected government complicity in the crime, although no one has ever stepped forward with credible evidence of specific allegations.

But those suspicions have received new attention in the past year because they are now being voiced by members of King's family, who previously had been silent on the issue. King family members have taken to national television to declare that Ray is "innocent." They also say the April 4, 1968, assassination was the result of a complex government plot, involving local police, the CIA, the FBI, military intelligence and even then-President Lyndon B. Johnson.

That scenario was laid out in "Orders to Kill," a book written by Pepper, Ray's attorney. The King family has continued to

FILE PHOTO/UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

James Earl Ray is taken into Shelby County, Tenn., jail in July 1968 after his arrest for April 4 slaying of Martin Luther King Jr. He pleaded guilty in March 1969, recanted three days later.

embrace that theory, even though key elements of Pepper's story have been undercut in news reports.

"Dr. Pepper and James Earl Ray have engaged in a cruel hoax on Dexter King and his family," Coffee said. "There is no evidence that would support the supposition that James Earl Ray did not kill his daddy. We have attempted to talk to Dexter King directly, through third parties and through letters to explain to him why the evidence of Ray's guilt is overwhelming. But he refuses to extend the courtesy of even returning a phone call. . . . It is unfortunate that Dr. Pepper has isolated him from the truth."

King family members declined comment yesterday.

Ray was arrested two months after King was killed. His fingerprints were found on the alleged murder weapon, and fibers from the crime scene were found in his car. There was also evidence that he had stalked King prior to the assassination.

Ray pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 99 years in prison in March 1969. But three days later, he recanted his plea, saying he was pressured into it by his lawyer. In subsequent attempts to win a trial over the years, Ray and his lawyers have offered wildly varying theories on the circumstances surrounding King's murder.

"There is simply no credible evidence to support a new trial for Mr. Ray," District Attorney William L. Gibbons said.

Earlier this week, Pepper held a news conference in Atlanta with former FBI agent Donald Wilson, who claimed he had found evidence supporting Ray's assertion of a conspiracy.

Wilson said he discovered the evidence—two slips of paper with the name "Raul" (a different spelling from the one Ray has used) on them in Ray's car—but did not tell anyone until now. An FBI spokesman dismissed the claim as a "total fabrication" and said agency records show Wilson was not among the agents who searched the car.

"Our position is James Earl Ray is where he needs to be," Lee said. "In prison for the rest of his life."